

Review Article

Gurharpal Singh, *Communism in Punjab: A Study of the Movement up to 1967*, Delhi: Ajanta Publication, 1994, pp. viii+355, ISBN 81-202-0403-4

The comparatively long-held emphasis on a mainstream *national* history, especially during the nationalist period, effectively impeded the development of regional and ethnic histories in post-independence South-Asia. Both India and Pakistan, in their pursuit to construct and augment trans-regional and largely statist nationalism, tried to direct, articulate and project consensus-based histories until very recent year¹. Concurrently, the Cambridge school focused on the pivotal role of state (in this case, colonial state in India), modernist elites and politico-constitutional issues in the context of centrality of British institutions with the portrayal of Indian nationalism(s) as the official construct(s), divesting South Asians of any major indigenous initiatives. Even if the South Asians elite attempted any ideological postulation it was interpreted within the vortex of the colonial state and its powerful westernising institutions, with the interactive Indian elites situated on the receiving end². The seminal works by non-establishment intellectuals, communist and gender historians, or their counterparts interested in the 'little voices of History' definitely introduced news discourse in South Asian historiography by breaking the age-old triangular frigidity³. The development of regional and ethnic studies, affirming the pluralist ethos within the historical and contemporary perspective of the respective states reflect a wider receptivity towards diversity simultaneous with the maturing of South Asian historiography⁴. Evolution of such a thematic plurality is a more recent phenomenon with the erstwhile focus shifting from powerful 'cores' to more resilient regional or federating 'peripheries'. In addition, such a discourse reflects a departure from overgrown tradition of personality-centred historical polemics. Concurrently, such a post-modernist

historiographical tradition aims at establishing an equilibrium between state and civil society by rejecting the erstwhile state-centric explanations which merely took societies as the mute and passive appendages of an all-powerful state. The challenges to traditional and largely powerful state structures from the forces of ethnicity, human rights groups, media, judiciary, women's associations and the independent think-tanks -- the diverse yet vital forces of civil society -- have already initiated a greater demand for wider empowerment and decentralisation through dialogue and debureaucratisation. From the former East Pakistan to present-day Indian-held Kashmir, the state in South Asia has been confronted with a die-hard dilemma where the forces of civil society, however weak and infantile they may appear, are striking at the roots of monopolisation and coercion. Thus, the historical debate is turning out to be more responsive by urging a newer and broader consensus with the body-politic taking aboard the pluralist forces⁵.

The ongoing and largely unresolved contestation among the multiple identities in South Asia has not only rendered the state itself into a major arena but has equally influenced significant processes like nation-building and community-formation beside enriching an interdisciplinary historiographical debate⁶. Embryonic forces of federal nationalism -- Indian, Pakistani or Sri Lankan -- are still unable to assume a superordinate and consociational role by coopting communities rooted in the powerful forces of religion, region, language, and caste/class differentiations. It proves beyond any doubt that any imposition from above despite all the innocent pretensions but lacking broader grass-root consensus achieved through democratic and cooptive dispensation, will remain chimerical and is bound to cause dismissive retaliation. Undoubtedly, during *nationalist* era, the elites did aggregate such primordial determinants to spearhead the case for independence by espousing idealised yet unspecified ideologies. The colonial state, through its manifest politico-administrative measures and also by default allowed such ideological constructions despite their ambiguous and infantile disposition. No wonder, soon after independence, their inherent contradictions came into open with the *national* state insistent on maintaining a discretionary status quo. The official nationalism, advocated and implemented by the modernist elites, when confronted with ethnic (regional/lingual) and religious pluralism, turned out to be controversial and sought refuge in sheer coercion. The reassertion of ethnic or religious components in

spearheading the case for marginalised pluralism has been usually misperceived as secessionist *fitna* invariably by every regime in the region.

But as *Communism in Punjab* makes it amply clear, even the powerful ideologies like communism with all their mystique and conducive approbation, failed to transform regional identities themselves forcefully rooted in religious and linguistic commonalties as has been the case with the Sikhs. In the same vein, regionalist sentiments did play a crucial role in the triangular interaction with the contrasting forces of communist internationalism and trans-regional Indian nationalism. However, as Gurharpal brings out quite meticulously, such a vexatious relationship was not simply *given* and vacillated from one strategy to another. The study encompasses the period from the early decades of the present century to 1967 when, for the first time, the communists in the Punjab, despite their mutual party-based fissures, gained political power in a ruling coalition. After a precise overview of the existing interpretations on communist movements in India, the empirical study stipulates its own thesis, laid out in the historical and sociological context and probes the hierarchical nature of the communist organisation(s). It accepts the structural and policy dependence of the regional units over the national unit within the perspective of often competitive bilateralism between the Punjab and Indian Union. The author is definitely uneasy with some of the earlier studies on the subject done in the backdrop of global bipolarity and is equally mindful of the parallel case studies of Kerala and Bengal where the communist movements, unlike Punjab, triumphed over all other contending forces.

The earlier works only saw the development of communist movement in terms of East-West rivalry usually portraying it as 'a Bolshevik conspiracy' without attributing any central position to the indigenous realities⁷. The studies on the *Ghadr* politics emerged as the pioneering works on expatriate, non-communal but definitely ideology-oriented movements. Such studies represented communist, secular or middle-of-the-road historiography⁸. The communist traditions in post 1947 India, especially in Kerala and West Bengal, have been successful as transforming movements by establishing enduring governments in these states⁹. The emergence of the communist party in 1996 as a powerful coalitioner in the centre representing the third option, and the Indian communist movement being the largest in the world after China,

have definitely increased the academic interest to investigate the *internal* roots of the movement itself. Yet, there is still a greater interest to study the theme in the global context of Soviet-South Asian bilateralism¹⁰. However, the persistent communalization of the Indian Punjab despite its continuous political turbulence, exceptionally active militancy and an ongoing ideological debate, posits a formidable academic challenge. The study under review, while trying to respond to such significant queries, traces the roots of communists movement in the *Ghadr-Kirti-Kissan* axis within its own rural, agrarian and secular Punjabi ethos. The tangled issue of Punjabi sub-regional identities largely, due to the location of the province, its multi-religious character, rural-urban divide, further augmented by parallel forces of dissent and unrest as seen in case of *Hijrat* movement all made it difficult to obtain a consensual identity. As far as the contemporary Punjab was concerned, by virtue of its location as a border province so close to communists Russia and characterised by intense political activism, if not for its intra-communal contradictions, definitely appeared ripe for any mass-based radicalisation. However, the language controversy -- with Punjabi being the only language in the world with four simultaneous scripts -- an ever-enhancing accent on religion based identities in the Punjab and diverse regional political economies made it difficult for a cohesive movement to emerge and obtain an extra-territorial or supra-communal ethos. The *Ghadr-Kirti-Kissan* activists in their reincarnation as *Kirti Kissan* Party (KKP) came largely from the eastern and central Punjab and represented Sikh peasants who, in certain cases, were able to develop links with revolutionaries in Russia and elsewhere. Parallel to them, along with national parties like the Indian National Congress and Muslim League emerged a rather more urban, lower middle class Communist Party of India (CPI) which was unable to counterbalance powerful regional, autonomist rivals like the Akalis and Unionists. Their mutual dissension and competition for the same space did not allow the merger of a non-communal, Punjab-wide communist party, which itself suffered from official wrath, religious antagonism, and most of all, from the very agrarian, rural and localist nature of Punjab's societies where masses still seemed unprepared for any revolutionary change.

Until 1942 when the ban on the CPI was lifted by the Raj following Nazi attack of the Soviet Union, the communist activities in British India including Punjab remained subterranean. Following an

intense ideological debate, the CPI decided to support Allied war efforts which, according to many critics, was contradictory to their erstwhile denunciation of the imperialist powers. While the nationalists, especially during the Quit Indian Movement, demanded independence, the communists, on the contrary, advised cooperation and renunciation of nationalist defiance. The merger of the regional and national bodies, however, did not remove the parallel courses taken by the KKP and CPI in the Punjab. While the CPI, after initially advising for INC-ML cooperation, accepted the demand for Pakistan, the communist movement in the Punjab turned factionalist. A province already fragmented by communal violence with the Sikh minority demanding a separate state with Pakistan or union with India, did not feel at ease with such postulations. Like in the case of contemporary Bengal, the CPI failed to provide any regional solution to the dilemmic pluralism with each religio-ethnic community going its own way, and instead reverted to its national and structural prerogatives. The Akalis were able to make a headway by dilating on Hindustan, autonomous Punjab or Sikhistan within Pakistan, especially in intra-Sikh bickering when Master Tara Singh and Sardar Baldev Singh pursued two divergent strategies. The post-partition transfer resulted into a bi-communal Punjab which, in the 1950s saw a new contestations between Indian nationalism and an assertive Sikh identity -- a federal entity with a majoritarian Hindu population and a regional Sikh minority community, both applying religious and linguistic differentials in self-definition. Religion and language re-emerged as two major determinants with Punjabi Hindus opting for Hindisation as opposed to *Gurmukhi* Punjabi providing the bed-rock to Punjabi/Sikh identity. It was not until several *maran bharats* (fast unto death) by various Sikh leaders like Tara Singh and Sant Fateh Singh that eventually a much smaller Punjabi *subah* came into being. Such upheavals, one after the other since the first Curzonian partition of the province in 1901, did not lessen the volksgeist idealisation of the *Ghadr* and *Kirti* heroes though the very bifurcation of the CPI into CPI and CPM did widen the existing chasm. As *communism in Punjab* reveals this great divide within the movement in 1964 had taken place due to ideological and global reasons and was duly reflected in the province. Following another major upheaval in the form of Green Revolution the province, quite contrary to general suppositions, did not turn red rather simply became more communal leading to the militant activism of the 1980s.

The study is unique not only in terms of its vast source-material, never utilised before, but also in the context of its thematic continuity and a broad sweep. A number of pamphlets in Punjabi, Urdu, Hindi and English have been consulted in addition to numerous specialised reports and recently declassified documents. Its diverse and exhaustive references speak for the richness of its sources and the research provides an interesting interface between the disciplines of history, political science and sociology¹¹. The biographical section on various communist leaders and thinkers, including many legendary *babas*, is quite useful whereas the pertinent tables provide first-hand statistical information. One would have like to see more references to other contemporary parties like the Unionists, Ahrars, INC and the ML without really increasing the present volume. In addition, a smaller section on the communist movement in the post-1947 West Punjab and its debacle due to the machinations of military-bureaucratic oligarchy could have been quite appropriate. But, such observations are not meant to underrate an otherwise quite a timely, painstaking and exhaustive contribution in an ever-diversifying South Asian historiography.

Iftikhar H. Malik

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Such a historical genre had preceded the very independence of the sub-continent. One may enumerate a number of works done in the early years of independent South Asia. Authors like R.C. Maujandar, Bipan Chandra or Ishtiaq H. Qureshi and K.K. Aziz do represent such an ideological stance. In the case of Pakistan movement, works by Khalid B. Sayeed or Hafeez Malik, the Muslim expatriate scholars mediated between nationalist and Cambridge schools with more emphasis on modernists.
2. One can mention a whole list of such historiography but a few titles would suffice. For instance, see Anil Seal, *The Origins of Indian Nationalism*, Cambridge, 1974; Francis Robinson, *Separatism among Indian Muslims*, Cambridge, 1994 (reprint); David Page, *The Prelude to Partition*, Oxford, 1982. Seal's student, Ayesha Jalal, in her interpretation, saw the creation of Pakistan in reference to only a few ambitious individuals representing state-related powerful groups. To her, the creation of Pakistan, not inevitable at all, was a crucial stage

in the complex and competitive moves on a political chessboard divested of any historical or ideological dimensions. Islam, community-building, Muslim consciousness, Pakistan as a superordinate identity mediating among amongst multiple regional and sectarian identities or the role of classes and indigenous economic pressure groups do not enter the debate at all. See her *The Sole Spokesman*, Cambridge, 1994 (reprint). One comes with the same problem in her second book: *The State of Martial Rule: The Origins of Pakistan's Political Economy of Defence*, (Cambridge, 1990), though her recent comparative work does witness more receptivity to afore-mentioned dynamics; See *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia*, Cambridge, 1995.

3. Aziz Ahmed's studies opened a new vistas for the generation of Barbara Metcalf, David Lelyweld, Farzana Shaikh and Rafiuddin Ahmed. In the same vein, the Subaltern historians led by R. Guha augmented the efforts for 'history from below'.
4. Here one may mention studies by David Gilmartin, Sarah Ansari, Iftikhar H. Malik, Ian Talbot, Stephen Rittenberg and Imran Ali which have taken up regional/ethnic/provincial units to establish a powerful traditions, comparable to otherwise routine and oft-repeated national construct.
5. For instance, see Iftikhar H. Malik, *State and Civil Society in Pakistan: Politics of Authority, Ideology and Ethnicity*, London, 1996.
6. In reference to Punjab experience, see Iftikhar H. Malik, 'Identity Formation and Muslim Politics in the Punjab, 1897-1936: A Retrospective Analysis', *Modern Asian Studies*, 29, 2, May 1995: pp. 293-323.
7. One may quote a number of such case-studies: Sir Cecil Kay, *Communism in India*, London, 1971; David N. Druhe, *Soviet Russia and Indian Communism*, London, 1956; and, John H. Kautsky, *Moscow and the Communist Party of India*, London, 1956. However, despite its sponsorship by The Ford Foundation, *Communism in India* by Gene D. Overstreet and Marshall Windmiller (Los Angeles, 1959), offered a different perspective by virtue of being less anti-Communist. It analysed communist movement from 1920s to 1958 within the dual environment of India and international communism.
8. See Sohan Singh Josh, *Hindustan Gadar Party: A Short History*, 2 volumes, New Delhi, 1977,78 and, Bhagwan Josh, *Communism Movement in Punjab*, Delhi, 1979. In one of my studies, I devoted three chapters to this phase in activism not to refute the existing

- explanation of this trans-national and inter-ethnic activism but to establish the fact that many Muslims from India in general and from the Punjab in particular, participated in such sort of politicking. See, Iftikhar H. Malik, *U.S. - South Asia Relations, 1784-1940: A Historical Perspective*, Islamabad, 1988.
9. T.J. Nossiter, *Communism in Kerala: A Study in Political Adaptation*, Delhi, 1982, and, Paul R. Brass and Marcus F. Franda, eds. *Radical Politics in South Asia*, Cambridge, Mass., 1973. Kerala, in one study, was characterised as the Yenan of India. See, Victor M. Fic, *Kerala: Yenan of India*, Bombay, 1971.
 10. For a recent such study, see Linda Racioppi, *Soviet Policy Towards South Asia Since 1970*, Cambridge, 1994.
 11. It is quite encouraging to see the emergence of such inter-disciplinary studies on Punjab, mostly being carried out by the Punjabi intellectuals in diaspora. The decade-old Punjab Research Group (PRG), Pakistan Workshop, British Association for Pakistan Studies, British Association for South Asian Studies and the British Association for Punjab Studies, are some of the noted UK-based academic bodies engaged in furthering an objective scholarship on Punjab-related themes. In the same vein, the First International Conference on Punjabi Identity (Coventry, 1994) and the *International Journal of Punjab Studies* are the two recent results of such institutionalised efforts. The second such international conference on the Punjab is being planned for 1997. See, Pritam Singh and Shinder Singh Thandi, eds. *Globalisation and Region: Explorations in Punjabi Identity*, Coventry, 1996 (This is the volume based on the papers presented in the 1994 international conference). Also, see Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh, eds., *Punjabi Identity: Continuity and Change*, Delhi 1996.